

# New Teaching on the Virgin Birth

of St. Vladimir's Seminary



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Theotokos” (meaning the puerperium of the woman who gave birth to God in the flesh) to be even so much as mentioned in print in the Menaea on the second day after Christmas, but only the words Synaxis of the Theotokos. For according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who is in agreement on this point with this Council, the birth of Christ alone occurred without any concomitant of childbed; accordingly, the term childbed and the synonyms thereof cannot properly be applied to the incorrupt and fully preserved body of the Virgin who never had any experience of matrimony whatsoever. Since, however, it is a fact that the divine melodists and hymnographers often call the childbirth of the Theotokos a *locheia* in Greek (meaning: childbed), let this term be applied to her childbirth as a painless childbed.

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**Commentary on Canon 79  
of the Sixth Ecumenical Council**

This canon teaches that the parturition of the holy Virgin was without any childbed. For childbed (*puerperium*) is the emission of the foetus accompanied by pain and a flux of blood: but none of us ever believed that the Mother of God was subjected to sufferings of this sort, for these are the consequences of natural conception, but her conception was supernatural; and by the Holy Spirit it was brought to pass that she was not subjected to those evils which rightly are attached to natural parturition.

*The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 14  
Commentary by Zonaras

bounded and Whose birth was beyond the mind and reason of man, from common knowledge and our own experience to define and subscribe to the events attending Her ineffable childbirth. Henceforth, therefore, in case anyone should be caught in the act of doing this, if he be a cleric, let him be deposed from office; but if he be a layman, let him be excommunicated.

### **Interpretation**

(Edited for space)

Inasmuch as some Christians, actuated by their lack of positive knowledge, on the second day after Christmas boiled fine flour and other foodstuffs, which they ate and gave one another to eat, doing this for the sake of allegedly honoring the puerperium of the Theotokos (just as it is the custom to do in the case of other women who gave birth to children in a natural manner). On this account and for this reason, the present Canon decrees that hereafter such a thing shall not be done by Christians. For by such a custom—to liken the inexplicable childbirth of the Ever-Virgin to the common and humble birth of us human beings—cannot be considered any honor to her, who beyond the conceivability of man’s mind and reason gave birth in the flesh to the God the Word, Who cannot be bounded spatially; on the contrary, it is rather a dishonor. For just as we confess the conception of the Theotokos to have been seedless and to have resulted from the action of the Holy Spirit, so and in like manner we also join in confessing Her childbirth to have been above every accompaniment of any confinement due to what is commonly called childbed, which consists in giving birth to an infant with the accompanying pangs of childbirth and is followed by a flux of blood, according to Zonaras.\* Whoever should do this, if he be a cleric, let him be deposed from office; but if he be a layman, let him be excommunicated.

Hence iconographers painting icons ought not to depict the Theotokos on the occasion of the feast of the Nativity of Christ, to be lying upon a bed and apparently exhausted by the pain; but, on the other hand, neither ought the words “epilochia of the

## **On the Virgin Birth and the New Teaching of St. Vladimir’s Seminary**

Orthodox Christians must not confuse the virginal conception with the virgin birth of our Lord. The Church commemorates the first on the feast of the Annunciation, March 25, and the second nine months later, on December 25. Like all conceptions and births, they are two separate events.

The Scriptures, the Creeds, the liturgical texts, the Holy Fathers, and all of Holy Tradition witness to the fact that our Lord had a virgin birth, i.e., no blood, no afterbirth, no breaking of the seal. This is what the Orthodox Church means by “virgin birth.” It does not refer to the conception without a man, but refers precisely to the birth itself.

*For without seed He took flesh of a Virgin and rose from the tomb,  
without breaking the seal of either.*

*Akathist Hymn to our Lord Jesus Christ*

*Having kept the seals intact, O Christ, Thou didst arise from the  
tomb, O Thou Who didst not break the seal of the Virgin by Thy  
birth; and Thou hast opened unto us the gates of Paradise.*

*Sixth Ode of the Paschal Canon*

One wonders, then, at the new teaching coming forth from the former Dean of Saint Vladimir’s Seminary, at one time my professor, Father Thomas Hopko:

Although the Church insists that Mary remains forever a virgin, the only miracle in regard to the Lord’s birth is the virginal conception. There is no teaching of any other sort of miracle in regard to His birth; certainly no idea that he came forth from His mother without opening her womb.

*Winter Pascha*, by Thomas Hopko, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, p. 175.

What are we to make of the Akathist Hymn: “Without breaking the seal of either (the womb or the tomb),” and of the Paschal Canon: “Having kept the seals intact (of the womb and the tomb),”

and of all the other liturgical and patristic texts which witness to this truth?

Is it not true that “Orthodox” theologians through their involvement in the ecumenical movement have begun to think like the non-Orthodox? Of course, most of those involved in this movement do not accept the Virgin Birth, and the few who do accept it equate it precisely with the virginal conception, without distinguishing it from the Virgin Birth. Consequently, even Orthodox Christians are talking about the Virgin Birth when what they really mean is the virginal conception.

Those who use the icon of the Nativity which portrays the washing of the Infant as proof that there is “certainly no idea that He came forth from His mother without opening her womb” forget our Lord’s baptism at the hands of Saint John the Forerunner: “Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he suffered him” (Matt. 3:15). Without the need to be washed in baptism, so was our Lord washed, “Who didst not break the seal of the Virgin by Thy birth.”

May He Who did not break the seal of either the womb or the tomb grant you a Blessed Nativity and a Joyous New Year!

Least worthy of priests,  
Father David Belden

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He preserved the seals of her physical virginity while coming out from the usual exodus by which children come.

(Saint John of Damascus, *Second Encomium on the Dormition*)

The children of the Old Covenant who walked in the fire, yet were not burnt, prefigured the womb of the Maiden that remained sealed when she gave birth in fashion past nature. It was the same grace of God that brought forth both of these wonders to pass in a miracle.

(Matins, Irmos of Ode Eight, Tone One)

But by Thy Resurrection Thou didst convince them also concerning Thy Birth—for the womb was sealed and the grave secured—the womb that was sealed conceived Thee, the grave that was secured brought Thee forth. The virginal womb and sealed grave shout like a trumpet into the ear for the sake of a deaf person.

(*Tenth Nativity Hymn*, Saint Ephraim the Syrian)

Also, a prophet has announced these events and proclaimed a miracle (Ezekiel 44:2). Thou, Mother of God, art the closed gate, for through thee the Lord was entered and come forth. And the gate of thy chastity was not opened or disturbed; He traveled through it and kept it intact.

(Saint Romanos the Melodist,  
*On the Presentation in the Temple*, strophe 9)

### **Canon LXXIX: In Support of the Virgin Birth**

Confessing the divine childbirth to have resulted from the Virgin without confinement (*i.e.*, childbed), as well as without its being induced by seed; and preaching to all the flock, we require those who have done anything that was not proper to submit to correction. Hence, in view of the fact that after the holy nativity of Christ our God some persons are shown to be boiling fine flour (called in Greek *semidalis*) and giving thereof to one another, on the pretext of paying honor to the alleged puerperium of the perfectly immaculate Virgin Mother, we decree that nothing of the kind shall be done by the faithful. For this is no honor to the Virgin, at any rate, who gave birth to the Logos in the flesh, Who is incapable of being spatially

much read books as follow the example of Saint Vladimir's retinue, and attend the Liturgy.

(Father George Florovsky,  
*The Elements of the Liturgy in the Orthodox Church*)

To the Prophet Ezekiel of old, O Maiden, thou didst appear as the portal of life through which the Lord Incarnate alone passed: and He kept thee closed, O pure one, in that He is the Most High.

(Friday Matins, Ode III, Canon of the Theotokos)

Rejoice, O Portal of God, through which the Incarnate Creator passed without breaking thy seal.

(Tone III, Sunday, Theotokion of the Beatitudes)

A wonder new and divine: the Lord manifestly passeth through the closed door of the Virgin, naked at His entry, and God doth reveal Himself as corporeal as He issueth forth and yet the gate remaineth shut.

(Tone III, Sunday, Irmos, Canon of the Resurrection)

He was born of thee who knewest not man, O most pure one, without in any way opening the gates of thy flesh.

(Tone III, Sunday, Theotokion, Canon of the Resurrection)

For the womb was sealed and the grave was secured—the Chaste One in the womb and the Living One in the grave. Thy witnesses were the sealed womb and grave. The womb that was sealed conceived Thee: the grave that was secured brought Thee forth, the portal of God through which the Creator, having become flesh, passed through, preserving her virginity sealed.

(Theotokion, Typicon, Tone III of the Divine Liturgy)

He came out ineffably according to the Prophet Ezekiel, who said: This portal shall be shut, no one shall come through it but the Lord God of Israel alone.

(Dogmaticon Theotokion, Saturday, Small Vespers, Second Tone)

This theme also appears in numerous hymns and prayers. Ezekiel's prophecy is read at the Great Vespers of every feast of the Mother of God.

### ***Quotes from other sources:***

#### **Saint John of Damascus**

*Concerning our Lord's genealogy  
and concerning the holy Mother of God.*

... His birth was in accordance with the laws of parturition, while in that it was painless it was above the laws of generation. For, as pleasure did not precede it, pain did not follow it, according to the prophet who says, Before she travailed, she brought forth, and again, before her pain came she was delivered of a man-child. ... He who was conceived kept her who conceived still virgin, in like manner also He who was born preserved her virginity intact, only passing through her and keeping her closed.

...The ever-virgin One thus remains even after the birth still virgin, having never at any time up till death consorted with a man

...But this blessed woman, who was deemed worthy of gifts that are supernatural, suffered those pains, *which she escaped at the birth*, in the hour of the Passion, enduring from motherly sympathy the rending of the bowels, and when she beheld Him, Whom she knew to be God by the manner of His generation, killed as a malefactor...

*The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 9  
"Exposition of the Orthodox Faith," Book IV, Chapter XIV.  
By Saint John of Damascus

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#### **Saint Amphilochius, Bishop of Iconium**

*In Praise of Virginity, Marriage and Widowhood,  
and on the meeting of Our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Mother of God, Anna and Symeon*

... And he is of those who are contradictory who says, that if this has reference to the Lord, namely, what was written in the Law: every male opening the womb shall be called holy to the Lord, the Virgin has not remained a virgin. For the Scripture say clearly: every male

opening the womb, and the Virgin's womb was then truly opened, if this has reference to the Lord. But listen intelligently: in the Virgin Birth, the virginal gates were in no way opened, as He fittingly hath willed, who was conceived there, according to the word that were spoken concerning Him: this gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall pass through it: because the Lord the God of Israel hath entered by it, and it shall be shut. (EZECH. XLIV. 2)

As to what pertains to the Virginal nature, in no manner were the virginal gates opened, but as to what relates to the power of the Master Who was born, nothing is shut to the Lord, but all things are open unto Him. Nothing stands in His way, nothing impedes Him; for all things are open to the Lord. Wherefore do the powers of Heaven command the powers beneath: Lift up your gates, O ye princes, and be ye lifted up, O eternal gates: the King of Glory shall enter in.

(PS. XXIII. 7, 9)

*The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, Vol. I, page 175  
Saint Amphilochius, Bishop of Iconium



## Further Quotations Supporting the Virgin Birth

. . . Who in these latter times became incarnate ineffably of the pure Virgin and preserved intact the seals of her chastity. . .

(Second Exorcism of Saint Basil the Great,  
*The True Vine*, No. 24, p. 35)

We magnify, O Christ, Thy pure, all-blameless Mother, for she gave birth to Thee in the flesh in a supernatural manner, redeeming us from all error and destruction.

(Final Theotokion of the Ninth Ode  
of the Canon of Thursday Matins  
of the First Week of the Great Fast).

He took flesh of a Virgin and rose from the tomb without breaking the seal of either.

(*Akathist Hymn to Jesus*)

It is a token of Divinity, that He should leave the Virgin's womb inviolate after childbirth, and come forth in His Body from that tomb that was sealed.

(Severianus)

For He, while yet mortal, in being born could enter this world leaving sealed the womb of the Virgin, now immortal, rising up from the still sealed tomb goes forth from the world.

(Severianus)

He passed through the womb, yet kept it sealed.

(Nativity Matins, Troparia, Second Canon)

New was the Creation which the Creator showed to us His creatures, when He sprang forth from the seedless womb; and He preserved it incorrupt, even as it was, that we, seeing this marvel, may praise her as we cry out . . .

(*Akathist Hymn to the Theotokos*)

Christianity is a liturgical religion. The Church is first of all a worshiping community. Worship comes first, doctrine and discipline, second. Those who wish to know about Orthodoxy should not so